



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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SPORTSMEN HOPE SEA LETTUCE WILL BRING BACK BRANT, BUT BIRDS RESPOND SLOWLY

When sportsmen and ornithologists began receiving reports that the Atlantic brant, the migratory waterfowl that was almost wiped out by the disappearance of eelgrass along the Atlantic seaboard, was eating sea lettuce as a substitute for its favorite food, there was hope that the food problem of this bird had been solved. Recent reports from observers of the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of the Interior, however, indicate that eelgrass is still the brant's favorite vegetation and sea lettuce a poor substitute.

The sudden and nearly complete dying out of eelgrass along most of the American and European Atlantic coasts some 10 years ago was one of the most startling biological phenomena in recent times. Botanists agree that such rapidity of destruction and spread of the plant epidemic had previously been unknown in botanical history.

With the disappearance of the eelgrass, which normally formed more than 81 percent of the bird's food, the population of Atlantic brant dwindled so rapidly that the species was on the verge of extinction and the Biological Survey was compelled to recommend closed seasons on hunting. Except during 1935, the season has been closed on brant since 1933.

Intensive studies made on the habits of the brant after the wiping out of extensive eelgrass beds from North Carolina to the Canadian border revealed that the bird had begun to change its migration routes in what is thought to have been a vain search for new eelgrass beds. Later, observers noted that the brant was feeding on sea lettuce, or sea cabbage.

Dr. Clarence Cottam, of the Division of Wildlife Research, made laboratory analyses of a series of stomachs of brants. The Biological Survey food habits expert showed that the eelgrass now formed only some 21 percent of the total food contents, while sea lettuce, which previously formed less than 1 percent, formed 22 percent of the food contents.

Harold Peters, Atlantic flyway biologist for the Biological Survey, reported in May 1938 that brants in Northumberland County, New Brunswick, were changing their migration routes as the eelgrass supply diminished. In May 1939, on his annual waterfowl observation trips through the Maritime provinces, he noted that great use was made of sea lettuce by brants.

Whether or not sea lettuce can entirely replace eelgrass as a form of food for brant is not definitely known, but some observers are of the opinion that sea lettuce and other marine algae are eaten extensively by waterfowl only when better foods are not available.

The cause of the eelgrass disappearance is still not definitely known. Biological Survey investigators attempted to replant beds of eelgrass along the Atlantic coast, but the plantings were not immediately successful. The plantings were made from unaffected eelgrass from the Pacific coast. In the last few years, however, the stands seem to be improving, but the brant crops many of the areas before the plantings are reestablished.

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